

# SURVEY DEVELOPMENTS IN THE WATERS AROUND SABAH VIA A PARANGKANG SAILING EXPEDITION

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## **Abstract**

Sabah, one of the states of Malaysia in the northern part of Borneo, is surrounded by South China Sea in the west, Sulu Sea in the east, and Celebes Sea in the southeast. History has proven that the tides of these three seas played a significant role in the formation of modern Sabah. Focussing on the importance of maritime aspect, some sailors from the University of Malaysia in Sabah (UMS) in cooperation with various agencies made use of traditional boat known as *parangkang* among the Bajaus in navigating the aforementioned seas around Sabah on April 11–May 6, 2009. The objective of this expedition was to determine and consider some questions on maritime Sabah which must be addressed by researchers and other important agencies. Part of the results of this expedition showed that the three seas are not only worthy of its salinity but also as an identity marker of what Sabah is due to the fact that it is dynamic and always changes just like its tides.

*Keywords: Sabah, Parangkang, Bajau, Identity & Maritime*

## **Introduction**

Sabah, which is situated on the north islands of Malaysia, is the only state in Malaysia that is surrounded by three main seas, namely South China Sea (on the west coast), Sulu Sea (on the east coast) and Celebes Sea (on the southeast coast). History has shown that the high-low tide of these seas plays a significant role to the formation of modern Sabah today. Taking into account the importance of maritime in Sabah, an expedition sailing around Sabah waters was done on 11 April until 6 May 2009 by sailors of Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS) with the collaboration of various agencies. The expedition was done using a traditional Bajau *prahu* or boat known as *Parangkang*. The purpose of this expedition is to identify and examine a few questions on Sabah maritime which need to be considered by researchers and related agencies. It is found that the seas are indeed play a significant role in defining Sabah that is dynamic and versatile following the rise and fall of the sea level surrounding it.

According to ancient records, the formal making and use of *prahu* as a part of the lifestyle of people in Sabah has existed about 500 years ago or even earlier especially during the Sulu Sultanate reign (Jolo) who had succeeded to take control of the north and east coasts of Sabah from the Brunei Sultanate. To ensure the

continuity and strength of its entreport trade in the archipelago, the Taosug ministers along with their followers, mainly the Bajau people, had sailed using various types of *prahus* and boats like *garay*, *barangayan*, *salisipan*, *kora-kora*, *lepa-lepa*, *sappit*<sup>1</sup> and few other types of *prahus* and boats in Sulu and Celebes Seas. This is so, so that they can govern, exploit and take the maritime and jungle sources from Sabah and other territories in Borneo islands including Sulawesi for trading purposes in Jolo port. It can be said that the coming and opening of local settlement by Taosug and Bajau people, who came from south Philippines, has indirectly introduced and expended the arts of boating in Sabah and this, in the end, has become a part of Bajau community's culture living along the coastlines and islands in Sabah nowadays. Today the heritage of traditional *prahus* and boats has slowly disappeared through time except for *lepa-lepa* and *sappit*.

There are a few main purposes of this expedition. Among them are to trace back the history and culture of winged-boats; to do the mapping of islands based on *Peta Pelantar Benua Malaysia 1979*; to see the development of eco-tourism industry; the conservation of turtles, the impact of fishing to marine life; to identify unsafe marine species; the misuse of explosive devices, to find out about the socio-economic level of the Sea Bajau and islands community; to find out more about the *kampung air* heritage, the arts and culture, religions and beliefs; to find out about the culture of water transportation and risky waters; to identify the effects of global warming on islands, marine pollution, maritime crimes and others. This study is essential in order to record data and reconfirm maritime facts in Sabah for research purposes in future.

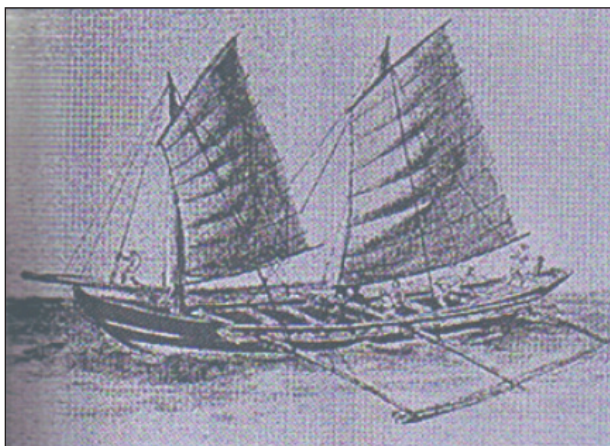
## Boats' Concepts and Designs

In Bajau language, *parangkang* refers to winged-boat<sup>2</sup> that is bigger than *lepa*. From historical perspective, the concepts and designs of this boat existed during the time when the east coast of Sabah was reigned by the Sulu Sultanate in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and these boats were known as *barangayan*, which was sailed using sailing cloth and rowed by slaves. This boat was usually owned by Taosug ministers and was used for trading, i.e. to carry forest and sea commodities as well as captives, who would be traded in Jolo port (the centre for Sulu Sultanate reign in southern Philippines). Compared to other Sulu Sultanate traditional boats, the wings of both sides, i.e. left and right, of the boat have balanced it and also enable it to carry more loads as well as make it more durable in enduring the harsh condition of Sulu Sea. *Parangkang* is different from *barangayan* (Figure 1) because the making of the boat (Photo 1) is actually based on the three different boats and Bajau traditional *prahus*, namely *lepa*, *boo'gok* and *sappit*.

It is also powered with engines of 13HP Mitsubishi brand. These boats are also known as pump-boats by Bajau people. The adaptation of its designs and technical parts are done to suit the expedition's needs and time. Specifically, the boat is 35 feet long and 8 feet width and it is made of wood. It was designed in December 2008 in Kampung Kebimbangan Tengah of Bum-bum Island, Semporna, under Hj Musari Ebbah's supervision, and the building of the boat was completed on April 2009. To ensure the safety of the boat, it was checked by a group of Semporna

marine police officers, maritime enforcement agency of Malaysia (Tawau branch) and maritime department of Sabah on March 2009. The boat is confirmed safe for sailing and is registered under Sabah Maritime Department. A technical test was also conducted in Semporna waters on 11-15 April 2009, and based on the results, the boat's weaknesses have been upgraded and repaired.

**Figure I: Barangayan**



Source: J.F. Warren, *Iranun and Balangingi: Globalization, Maritime Raiding and the Birth of Ethnicity*, (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2002) 197.

**Photo 1: Parangkang**

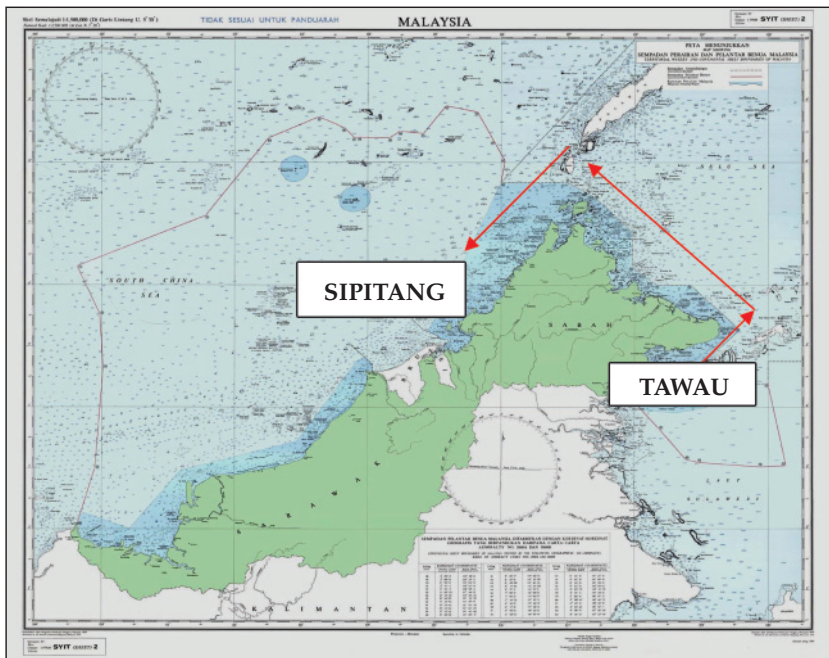


Source: Fieldwork

## Sailing Destination

The expedition of this *parangkang* boat took about 21 days and it had sailed in three main seas in Sabah that are Celebes Sea (south-east coast), Sulu Sea (east coast) and South China Sea in west coast Sabah. It started sailing in Tawau on 11 April 2009 and headed to the Gulf of Brunei (in the west coast of Sabah). The boat arrived in Semporna on 15 April 2009 to participate in Sabah Regatta Lepa 2009 on 17-18 April 2009. During the journey, the boat had stopped at few islands like Mabul, Gulisan, Sipadan, Manapilik and Bum-bum islands, to study the development of marine-based eco-tourism industry of these islands, as well as do the mapping of these islands. The stop was also done to study the people as well as the Sea Bajau community who live in a boat called *lanca*. Moreover, to study the traditional Bajau prahus and *kampung air*, the beach pollution and the fishing activity using glow technique science (*pukat jerut*) boat and others. After the regatta, the boat continued its expedition to Sulu Sea by heading towards Sandakan on 18 April 2009.

Figure 2: Sailing Directions and Destinations



During the sailing, the boat had also stopped in Timbun Mata and Tambisan islands of Sahabat and Tanjung Labian coasts (Lahad Datu) to study its mangrove, the safety of its Sabah-Philippines waters, mapping of the islands, effects of global warming onto the islands, lifestyle of the island people, marine sources, and others. On 29 April 2009, the boat had safely reached Sandakan for maintenance. After two

days anchoring in Sandakan, the boat continued its expedition to north Sabah and arrived in Kudat on 25 April 2009. Along the journey, it had stopped in few islands such as Berhala, Selingan, Gulisan, Jambongan islands with the purpose of studying the development of eco-tourism industry of these islands, turtle-hatching and breeding methods used on these islands and also conducting a few tests of fish-bombs method in Sulu Sea. While in Kudat, the boat stopped in few islands like Banggi and Balambangan as well as Tip of Borneo or the Cape of *Simpang Mengayau* in order to study its *kampung air*, beach pollution, fishing activities, the strong current of Sulu-South China Seas in *Simpang Mengayau* Cape and others.

After staying two days in Kudat, the expedition headed back to South China Sea and arrived in Kota Kinabalu on 30 April 2009. During the journey back, the boat had stopped in Mantanani and Usukan islands with the purpose of studying the development of eco-tourism industry of these islands, fishing activities using seine, marine sources and also the people of that community. On 2 May 2009, the expedition headed to its final destination that is the gulf of Brunei and it arrived in Sipitang on 4 May 2009. Again, during this journey, the boat had stopped at Gaya, Tiga and Dahat islands to study its *kampung air* (water village), beach pollution, fishing activities, mapping of the islands and others. Before the boat headed back to Kota Kinabalu, it stopped in Labuan on 5 May 2009 and finally, it arrived at the pier of Marine Borneo Research Institute, UMS on 6 May 2009, where a closing ceremony was inaugurated by YB. Datuk Nasir Tun Sakaran, a minister in the Department of Sabah Chief Minister.

## A Few Sailing Observations

The results of this expedition are interesting and can be recorded, studied and observed more in the future by other researchers. However, for the purpose of this article, matters like the winged-boats culture, status of islands, eco-tourism industries, turtle conservation, the islands' and Sea Bajau socio-economic status, water transportation and unsafe waters; as well as the effects of global warming on the islands will be discussed. During the expedition, it is found that *boo'gok*<sup>3</sup> a type of *prahu*, which is also known as *katig* and *dapang*<sup>4</sup> is used widely in Sabah mainly in Semporna, Sandakan and Kudat. Based on observation, it is found that the culture of this boat is very much influenced by Suluk and Bajau people, who originated from south Philippines. Moreover, the cost of the boat is cheap; it is very flexible during strong wind (due to its wings), capable to bring extra load, among others.

The boat is still widely used in Sabah even though the Sea Department of Sabah has banned the use of this boat due to maritime crimes mainly fish bombing<sup>5</sup> and it does not follow the department's specifications. In addition, the boat is not only used for fishing but also for public transportation between islands and mainland. Since the government has yet to build bridges from these islands to mainland, the people use the boat or bot *penambang* as their main transportation and also source of income. Although there are no regulations applying to the use of this boat, no record has been found reporting any serious accidents or casualties using the boat.

**Photo 2: *Boo'gok* in Mabul Island**



Source: Fieldwork

**Photo 3: Boat Transportation in Semporna Town**



Source: Fieldwork

During the expedition, it is also found that there are hundreds of islands on Sabah waters and according to Sabah Mapping and Measurement Department (JUPEM), there are 185 islands in Sabah, and from that number only 72 islands are occupied, whereas the remaining 113 islands are unoccupied. In addition, there are still small islands, coral reefs and small sandy lands along Sulu and South China Seas which are not registered in the map of Territorial Waters and Continental Shelf

Boundaries of Malaysia 1979. However, there are coral reefs with plants, which look like small islands along the waters of Bum-Bum Island in Semporna that are not suitable to be called islands. They are left unoccupied because they are not suitable for settlement or tourism purposes.

**Photo 4: Status and nameless? (Semporna)**



Source: Fieldwork

From the observation, it is also found that there are a few small islands in Sabah that have become smaller in size due to erosion, waves and an increase sea level that are due to global warming. For example, Gulisan Island in Sandakan and Gusungan Island in Semporna are among the islands for turtle breeding which are affected by these phenomena. If nothing is done to tackle these problems, the islands are expected to disappear from the surface of the sea and also in Malaysia Map 1979 in the next 15-20 years to come or even faster than that period. For the island people especially the Sea Bajau community or sea-nomads<sup>6</sup> who live on Gusungan Island in Semporna, will definitely face the effects of these phenomenon. From the researcher's observation, the island is basically sandy and the width of this island is only a quarter acre, which will disappear from sight in the next 15 years due to wave erosion.

It is also discovered that many islands in Sabah are known as resort islands and islands like Sipadan, Mabul, Kapalai, Langkayan, Matakang, Layang-layang Coral Reefs and few others are famous among scuba diving lovers and have generated main income to Sabah government. More than 90 percent of its tourists are foreigners who mainly come from United Kingdom, the United States of America, Australia, Korea, Japan, Germany, France and other parts of the world. This triggers an intriguing question as to why locals are not interested to enjoy the beauty of flora and fauna of these islands. From the interviews made with the chalets' owners as well as locals in Mabul, Kapalai, Matakang, Langkayan and Mantanani islands,

**Photo 5: Beach erosion in Gulisan Island (Sandakan)**



Source: Fieldwork

**Photo 6: Gusungan Island (Semporna)**



Source: Fieldwork

it is found that the service charges for one night stay is too high for a local tourist, i.e. around RM500-RM1000 per person. Therefore, many local tourists prefer to stay in chalets with homestay concept, which only costs them around RM70-RM100 per person a night. Apart from various fish species, turtles are among one of the main attractions for a diver.



Currently, turtles are among the marine species, which the Sabah government has identified as endangered, and is protected under the Sabah Parks and Department of Forestry enactment and is essential for the development of eco-tourism in Sabah. In relation to this, Sabah government has announced that Gulisan and Selingan islands in Sandakan as 'turtle islands' which are fully governed by Sabah Parks. Today, the breeding and conservation of baby turtles conducted by Sabah Parks are based on caged-breeding, where the eggs are placed in cages until they hatch and then the baby turtles will be returned back to the sea. However, based on observation, the method does not really contribute to the raise the number of turtles in Sabah because nearly 98 percent of these newly hatched baby turtles are eaten by predators such as fish, birds, lizards and some even found trapped in fishermen's net. During the expedition, a few matured turtles were found death in Sulu and South China Seas which could be due to fishing activities using *pukat hanyut*, *pukat jerut* and *pukat tunda*.

**Photo 7: Dead Turtle (South China Sea)**



Source: Fieldwork

Sabah, which is bordered by South China Sea (in the west coast), Sulu and Celebes Seas (in the east and south-east coasts), has hundreds of coral reefs that are rich with fish species and marine life. Studies have shown that these areas, which were once the 'fish gulf', are now having less fish to offer. It is no longer easy for fishermen to catch fish as they have to use GFS or echo-sounder machine in order to locate fish. A study done on these areas also shows that areas in Labian Cape (Lahad Datu), Jambongan (Sandakan) and Mantanani Islands (Kota Belud), which are once famous for its fishing areas, are no longer 'productive'. Based on observation as well as diving, it can be concluded that this phenomenon is caused by excessive fishing activities at these areas where most of the coral reefs were seen damaged due to fish bombing activities, the use of chemical poison and others.

The researcher also finds that the socio-economic level of the people of these islands, who are Bajau, Suluk, Ubian, Sea Bajau or *Pala'u*<sup>7</sup> and other ethnics which are mainly illegal immigrants, is surprisingly very low compared to those living on the mainland. For instance, the people living in Omadal<sup>8</sup> and Mabul islands do not have basic infrastructures like electricity, clean water supply and health clinics. They are mainly depended on generators and gravity spring. The Sea Bajau, for instance, lives in a very small house, which is made of used woods and roofed with *nipah* leaves; and some even live in boats called *lanca*. Almost all of the people of these islands depend on sea yields and only a small number of them works in chalets as general workers, dive masters and boat driver and others. The study has also identified a few dangerous areas, which could threaten the safety of boats and *prahu* during storm where waves can reach between 4-6 metres high. Among the areas are Labian Cape (Lahad Datu) in Sulu Sea, the Tip of Borneo (*Simpang Mengayau* Cape in Kudat) and Nosoonng Cape in South China Sea. The areas are covered with rocks, sand and coral reefs, which are visible and they can hardly be traced during stormy weather.

## Conclusion

This expedition sailing on Sabah waters using Bajau traditional boat, *parangkang*, has definitely yielded many important matters which need to be further studied. Today, issues and questions faced by Sabah are closely related to the seas surrounding it, i.e. South China Sea, Sulu and Celebes seas. The expedition has shown that sea is a complex entity due to its dynamic features and physical. The outcomes of this expedition show that the sea is an entity that is very important for development and stability of a country and most importantly, it should not be seen as a barrier, but a passage of togetherness for the islands in Sabah.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> See James F. Warren, *The Sulu Zone 1768-1898*, (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1981).

<sup>2</sup> See Ismail Ali & Mohammad Raduan Mohd. Ariff, *Pembudayaan Perahu Bercadik di Nusantara*, (Kuala Lumpur: University Malaya, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> See Ismail Ali & Jane Wong Kon Ling, "Boo'gok-Boo'gok: The Winged Boat of the Sea Bajau in Sabah", *Journal of the Malaysia Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Vol. 81 (2008), 19-26.

<sup>4</sup> See Ismail Ali & Mohammad Raduan Mohd. Ariff, *Pembudayaan Perahu Bercadik di Nusantara*, (Kuala Lumpur: University Malaya, 2009).

<sup>5</sup> See Ismail Ali, *Penyalahgunaan Bahan Letupan dalam Industri Perikanan di Sabah*, Occasional Paper No. 6, (Kota Kinabalu: Universiti Malaysia Sabah, 2007).

<sup>6</sup> See D.E. Sopher, *The Sea Nomads: A Study of the Maritime Boat People of Southeast Asia*, (Singapore: National Museum Singapore, 1965). See also Clifford Sather, *The Bajau Laut: Adaptation, History and Fate in a Maritime Fishing Society of South-Eastern Sabah*, (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1977).

<sup>7</sup> See Halina Sendera Mohd. Yakin, *Identiti Budaya Etnik Pala'u di Semporna, Sabah: Konservasi, Adaptasi dan Transformasi Budaya*, Occasional Paper No. 7, (Kota Kinabalu: Universiti Malaysia Sabah, 2007).

<sup>8</sup> See Yap Beng Liang, *Orang Bajau Pulau Omdal: Satu Kajian Tentang Sistem Budaya*, (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1993).

